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Lansdale Team in Vietnam Careful to Avoid Limelight

By John Maffre

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SAIGON, Dec. 10 — The quietest American in South Vietnam is a retired Air Force general who wishes he could vanish into the Vietnamese woodwork.

Ever since he returned here in August, he and his team of 13 associates have been virtual hermits as far as public attention is concerned. They want to keep things that way.

Even the designation of their mission is a masterpiece of vagueness. The sole pronouncement from the U.S. Embassy came on Aug. 31:

"Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge today announced the appointment of Mr. Edward Lansdale as Chairman of the U.S. Mission Liaison Group to the Secretary General of the Central Rural Construction Council."

The Council in question deals with "pacification," the endeavor to bring peace and the benefits of government authority to a torn-up countryside. This has been going on in frequently misguided fits and starts for ten years or more.

Retired Intelligence Officer

The "Mr." is Maj. Gen. Edward Lansdale, USAF (Rct.), one-time intelligence officer, a legendary influence in the Philippines fight against the Huk rebels, and an alumnus of the school of frustration directed by President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Intelligence officers as a breed are not given to shouting about their activities from the rooftops, and there are pointed reasons for Lansdale and his associates to maintain a discreet silence.

For one thing, they are bending over backwards to reassure Saigon officials that they are here to help the officials strengthen their authority, to help them uncover and develop their own resources of natural leadership, and not to try to impose an American-written course of national conduct on them.

Aims to Avert Chaos

This will take some doing. The Vietnamese are being advised and prodded on every conceivable field of human activity here. Over the years, this has generated a degree of resistance and at times open resentment.

Basically, the Lansdale group regards itself as a catalyst in Vietnamese society. It does not regard the Vietnamese social revolution as a lost cause, but it is painfully aware that time is running short. In fact, there are a number of Vietnamese in responsible positions who believe that only chaos can result if today's renewed attempt fails to remake the country into a viable political and social entity.

They feel—and they have made their feelings known—that if basic national institutions do not take root behind whatever limited degree of military protection is available, any kind of peace that may come to this country will find it hopelessly vulnerable to political sabotage.

Right now there is some earnest politicking going on in the positive sense, which was certainly not the case less than two months ago.

Ky's New Outlook

The government is reportedly laboring on the establishment of an advisory group of selected Vietnamese, perhaps 70 or 80, to advise the Military Directory. There is also the prospect of a national constitution being drawn up to be publicly examined and debated in the coming year, with the hope that national elections for an assembly or legislative body may be held the year after that.

It is anyone's guess how much of this energy is due to quiet American persuasion. Certainly Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, a young air force general who had been untutored in civilian administration and until recently deeply mistrustful of it, has matured in his office and is concerned about basing authority on the expressed acceptance of the people.

This of itself is by no means the whole answer. The people around Lansdale, who act as followers through men for Lodge, know from years of experience that a government which does not produce material benefits—regardless of any popular mandate—will go the same way of all previous ones here.

This means land reform, begun again after a four-year lapse, but far from being off the ground yet. It means rural electrification, which presents enormous physical obstacles. It means price stabilization, in an economy which is being twisted out of shape by Vietnam's own war effort and by the huge military buildup of the United States here.

Vict Cooperation Needed

Among other things, these and other benefits could materialize only through a heroic exercise in something which is notably lacking in members of the Vietnamese government—cooperation among themselves. The concept of cooperating freely among departments without referring everything to some higher authority in Saigon which invariably reacts with glacial speed, is alien to the Vietnamese custom. This unhappy situation is as much a legacy of French colonial rule as it is of Vietnamese character.

Lansdale and his colleagues claim they arrived here with no radical new ideas to sell. They say they would like to help generate action on many old and generally simple ones that have never been given a fair trial.

Many of these salesmen are old hands at the game, here and in the Philippines and elsewhere. Men like retired Cols. Charles T. R. Bohannan and Napoleon D. Valeriano labored for years in the Philippines, Valeriano being a native of that country.

They've Had Problems

Some of them had their problems, not only with the South Vietnamese, but with

elements of the U.S. Mission in the past who did not see eye to eye with their methods or their objectives.

There is still a fair amount of residual suspicion about the Lansdale mission in Saigon, which is one of the reasons for its studied effort in remaining inconspicuous.

Lansdale, a slow-spoken and philosophical type of man, is fully aware that this quiet operation invites some startling speculation about his mission and the weight he can throw around.

He and his colleagues groaned about a recent article in London's Economist magazine, which suggested that they could call upon the vast resources of the U.S. Mission, including American troops and the minions of the CIA, in their objective of making the South Vietnamese government shape up.

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